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Abstract

Impolite and aggressive behaviour of anonymous users appears to be an important feature of online newspaper comments. This paper identifies and investigates how impoliteness is utilized strategically by newspaper readers to attack the author of an article. Empirical data is drawn from "Have-your-say" sections of the Guardian Online, Times Online and Telegraph Online. Results illustrate that impolite moves frequently involve face-threats that question the journalists' authority, credibility and trustworthiness. In the main part of the paper a categorization scheme for different types of impolite moves is introduced and a working definition of impoliteness in the context of "Have-your-say" sections presented. After having sketched a number of fundamental methodological and theoretical challenges in impoliteness research, the paper also demonstrates how the communicative setting and medium influence the realization and interpretation of impolite behaviour in those forms of public debates. Given the challenge of identifying and conceptualizing impoliteness in general and more specifically in a computer-mediated environment, netiquette rules prove especially useful for norms of appropriateness. It is also argued that the strength of those face-threats may be boosted by the fact that they are uttered in front of a large audience and more specifically the journalist's readership.

Keywords: Impoliteness, computer-mediated communication, reader responses, mass media, activity type, influence of medium

1. Introduction

While the field of politeness research looks back on a long history, paradoxically, the opposite can be said for the study of impoliteness. As Locher and Bousfield (2008: 2) note in their introduction to *Impoliteness and power in language,* only recently has there been a shift to study the

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phenomenon of impoliteness more extensively (cf. Lachenicht 1980; Austin 1990; Beebe 1995; Culpeper 1996, 2005; Kienpointner 1997; Culpeper et al. 2003; Mills 2005 as cited in Locher and Bousfield [2008: 2]). The recently evolving impoliteness debate also demonstrates that there are numerous fundamental methodological and theoretical challenges that have not yet been resolved. I will discuss three of the crucial problems here.

Firstly, there is no solid agreement among researchers as to what actually constitutes impoliteness and thus how one can identify and conceptualize impoliteness in the first place (cf. Locher and Bousfield 2008: 3). Generally, one can distinguish between two distinctive views in the field: first order and second order im/politeness approaches. First order theorists focus on lay people's point of view with regard to what should be considered impolite or polite. Second order theorists take the lay-person's perspective into consideration to a certain extent but try to grasp the concept of im/politeness on an abstract, objectified and theoretical level (cf. Locher and Bousfield 2008: 5). According to Culpeper (2008: 31−32), another key differentiator between those two approaches is the treatment of the parameter "intentionality": "Intentionality is associated with im/politeness$_2$ approaches and resisted by im/politeness$_1$ approaches: In a first order approach to impoliteness, it is the interactants' *perceptions* of communicators' intentions rather than the intentions themselves that determine whether a communicative act is taken to be impolite or not. (Locher and Watts, this volume: 80, emphasis in original)".

While the assessment of speaker intention and/or hearer perception appears to be a useful approach in determining whether an utterance could be defined as impolite or not, we need to bear in mind the following obstacle. The identification of speaker intention and hearer perception is inevitably built on the reconstruction of what is going on in people's minds. In their discussion on speaker intention, Culpeper et al. (2003: 1552 as cited in Bousfield [2008: 74]) propose a sensible solution to this problem. They suggest studying a number of contextual, discoursal and sociological variables alongside the actual utterances. Building on Culpeper's approach, Bousfield (2008: 74) proposes to consider variables such as "the discoursal roles of the participants, the context, the co-text, the activity type one is engaged in, previous events, affect between the interactants and, of course, power, rights and obligations of the interactants". While it is crucial to factor in such contextual variables when deciding whether an utterance could be identified as impolite or polite, researchers still need to find a way of grasping context systematically. For example, the expectations and norms of a community of practice could be used to illustrate deviations from such norms and thus also

help to identify im/politeness. The question which then arises is to what extent the expectations and norms of a community of practice, among other factors, should be considered to account for successful impoliteness.

In contrast to traditional politeness theories (cf. Brown and Levinson 2006 [1987/1978]), post-modern im/politeness work generally assumes that impoliteness is not inherent in language and needs to be judged against the norms of a community of practice/activity type in a particular context (cf. Culpeper 2008: 20). This is in line with a general shift in the study of linguistic phenomena which postulates that communicative acts cannot be analyzed independently of their context. In other words, there is no utterance that could be identified as universally impolite. Locher and Watts (2008) argue that even during one interaction the speaker and the hearer could interpret the same message differently. Thus, according to them, whether an utterance can be considered polite or impolite, always depends on the "judgements" by the speaker and hearer "during an ongoing interaction in a particular setting" (2008: 78). Also, while it might be perfectly acceptable and appropriate to use impoliteness in certain contexts (army training [Culpeper 1996], courtroom interaction [Lakoff 1989], "exploitive" chat shows and quiz shows [Culpeper 2005] or in political debates during election periods [Harris 2001; Kienpointner 2003] as cited in Kienpointner [2008: 244]) the same communicative behaviour might be considered gravely impolite and unacceptable in a different context. Compare, for example, the use of expletives by sergeants in military drills against the use of expletives in a pupil-teacher interaction. In the latter case, expletives are potentially less likely to be accepted. Despite the fact that contextual and norm factors seem crucial, the problem of identifying and accounting for different sets of norms that might come into play during one and the same interaction remains to be solved. Culpeper argues:

> We need a complex vision of norms if we are to explain cases like that reported in Mills (2002: 86) in which a conference participant stated that in his year's army training "he found the level of impoliteness personally threatening and offensive", but that nevertheless he "recognized that it was appropriate to the context and did not in fact complain to the authorities about it." (Culpeper 2008: 40)

Yet there is another challenge of consequence for the interpretation of impoliteness in the particular study here. Traditional tools for evaluating impoliteness in face-to-face interaction cannot be consistently applied to computer-mediated communication (CMC). CMC is defined here as communicative exchanges among interactants by means of technological devices such as computers or mobile phones (Locher 2010: 1). One char-

acteristic feature, especially of many text-based CMC modes of communication (e. g., blogs, emails), is that they are "'anonymous' (faceless, bodiless)" forms of interaction (Herring 2001: 621). Thus, variables of interest for the study of impoliteness, such as non-verbal cues including gestures or facial expressions and prosodic aspects (except for "emoticons" and orthographical emphasis such as capitalization) are not available in chat and forum discussions or user comments in "Have-your-say" sections.

The focus of this paper is the study of the role of impoliteness in written exchanges between the readership and journalists. Specifically, the aim is the description and analysis of communicative moves by online commentators to aggravate the face of journalists for strategic purposes. Drawing on data from user comments across the online news media sites The *Guardian Online*, *The Daily Telegraph Online* and *Times Online*, I propose a definition of impolite moves and illustrate how those moves can be categorized in this specific communicative setting.

The structure of the paper is as follows: I will first provide a description of the data and the type of interactional exchanges that are the focus of this study. I then proceed to characterize key features of online newspaper comments and discuss the impact of the communicative setting and medium which are likely to affect the realization and interpretation of impolite behaviour in "Have-your-say" sections. In the main part of the paper I will introduce my bottom-up and top-down method of analysis and provide a definition of how I understand realizations of impoliteness in this context. Based on the results of my data analysis and by means of examples, I will present my categorization scheme featuring different types of impolite moves. I will argue that these are used strategically to question the journalists' authority, credibility and trustworthiness.

2. Data

2.1. The type of data used

Online newspaper comments are an internet-based form of interactive audience participation (a successor to traditional forms such as letters to the editor and speakers' corners [cf. Baron 2008: 100]). They are interpersonal, written contributions by members of the newspaper readership and allow anonymous users to publicly share their personal opinion and discuss and debate newspaper content with a potentially vast readership (Dürscheid 2007: 5).

Below most current articles and usually across blog post sections of online newspapers, users have the option to post their comments via an online form. Depending on the house rules of the newspaper (netiquette),

there are either pre- or postmoderation rules in place[1]. Thus comments will either appear on the website instantly after submission (and will be checked for appropriateness by moderators at a later stage), or – and this is the less common case – they will be published after having been checked for their appropriateness by the newspaper moderators. Usually there is a limit with regard to the length of the post (i.e., number of characters per post).

2.2. The dataset

The dataset is drawn from a collection of articles that attracted most user comments during five consecutive days in April 2009 on the following news media websites: *The Guardian Online, The Daily Telegraph Online* and *Times Online*. Each website keeps track of the rankings on a daily basis (including video blogs). Articles in the dataset covered the following topics: national and international politics, religion and societal issues. In sum, I focused on 15 articles and examined the first 50 associated user responses per article. This adds up to a total dataset of 750 user comments.

The corpus is especially suitable for the study of impoliteness as it appears that impolite behaviour of anonymous users is an important feature of online newspaper comments. This phenomenon is not only common to newspaper comments but is in line with what researchers have discovered as characteristic of many areas of CMC: the disrespectful and aggressive behaviour of users in the cyberspace (cf. Döring 2003: 270–275; O'Sullivan and Flanagin 2003). In newspaper comments such communicative moves can be targeted towards other users but also towards the journalists themselves. Utterances like *Speak for yourself lazy, self important journalist!!!!* and *Don't tell me how to think in this patronising, mawkish manner* (see Figure 1) appear to be considerably offensive despite the fact that this is a speech situation where people are expected and even invited to criticize, disagree and debate news affairs[2]. Those types of user comments form the basis of my study here.

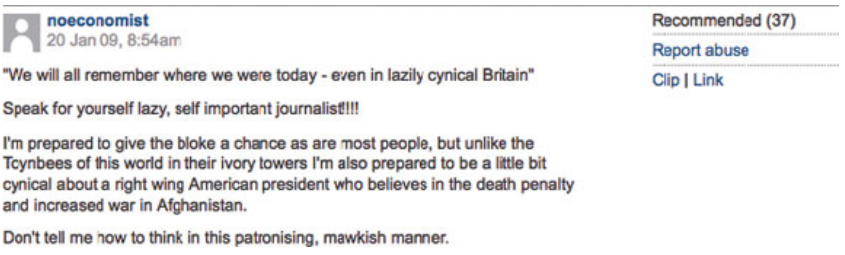

Figure 1. *Example of an impolite user comment*[3].

2.3. Interactants' profiles, roles, and constellations

As previously mentioned, Bousfield (2008: 74) suggests that such variables as discoursal roles, past encounters of participants, demographics of users, cultural frame of communication, topic control and turn-taking should be considered. The following can be said about these variables in my dataset: In commentary sections, interactants can be assigned discoursal roles based on Burger's (2005: 3−19) categorization scheme of roles in mass media audiences. In "Have-your-say" sections, we can divide interactants into "communicators" (2005: 3−5) and "recipients" (2005: 5−10). Interactants have the option to switch these discoursal roles during the same interaction. Keeping in mind that participants are operating in an asynchronous medium, the same interaction is defined as the string of comments associated with one article. Both the journalist and the commentators have the option to act as communicators. The members of the moderation team of the newspaper are the third group of interactants who have the option to act as communicators in the comment sections.

According to Burger (2005: 8) the recipients can be divided into the "effektive Rezipienten" [actual recipients] and the "intendierte Rezipienten" [intended recipients]. Intended recipients are those who have actually been targeted by the communicator. In "Have-your-say" sections, a comment can be addressed simultaneously to the journalist, other commentators and the general readership. Actual recipients are all those who are not directly addressed but happen to be present at the speech event. Since the communication in my dataset is taking place in a public space, we can refer to the entire readership that is potentially reading those comments as actual recipients. The intended recipients can either be addressed directly or indirectly. By indirect address I mean that the communicator is talking about them with somebody else rather than addressing them directly (cf. Günthner's [2000: 76] discussion of this distinction for reproaches).

When it comes to the past encounters of interactants, in my dataset the frequency of previous "virtual" contacts among interactants is assumed to be low or non-existent. In other words, unlike in many newsgroups and chat rooms where users regularly meet online to share their views on certain topics and get to know each other over time, this is not necessarily the case for participants in "Have-your-say" sections. In fact, it might be the case that total strangers communicate with each other on a one-off basis.

The same could be said about the demographics of interactants and the cultural frame of communication. Since these news sites can be accessed worldwide we have to assume a potentially international and thus

heterogeneous audience. For the study of impoliteness in my dataset we thus need to keep in mind that the users are likely to have different norms, cultural expectations, and communicative competences.

Also, users have the ability to remain anonymous in contrast to the journalists whose names are usually displayed next to the article and users know that s/he is present there in her/his role as an official representative of the newspaper. The newspaper's netiquette and ethics can also be considered part of the cultural frame of communication. Along with users' obligation to adhere to rules of appropriate communicative conduct[4], journalists are required to demonstrate ethically sound professional behaviour. Newspapers usually set their own editorial standards and, additionally, *The Professional Code of Conduct* (PCC) (cf. The Professional Code of Conduct 2009) defines ethical behaviour for the entire press industry in the UK. While the PCC aims to protect individuals (e. g., safeguarding of privacy, non-harassment of individuals) it also requests journalists to adhere to such values as accuracy, objectivity and truthfulness in their news reporting. Newspapers such as *The Guardian* explicitly ask their journalists to subscribe to these standards (cf. The Guardian's Editorial Code 2007). As is argued in this paper, when journalists are accused by commentators of not adhering to such guidelines, this may question their core competencies as professional journalists (cf. also Cotter's discussion [2010: 51] on the importance of "maintaining credibility" as a "larger journalistic goal").

In terms of topic control and turn-taking we can note that topics are generally in the control of journalists. In other words, users have the right to react to articles but diversion from the topic might result in comments being deleted by the newspaper moderation team. Turn-taking, on the other hand, is affected by the constraints of the medium including asynchrony and the non-linearity of communication.

2.4. Methodological advantages and disadvantages of the dataset

The methodological advantages of using articles that attracted a lot of comments from the audience are as follows: Firstly, such articles contain more interactive discussions among users. Secondly, I assume that those articles are potentially more controversial and thus a good starting point for collecting impolite-rich data. Thirdly, we have got naturally occurring data at our disposal. Researchers are hardly faced with the observer's paradox (cf. Bousfield 2008: 7) since users are not aware of the presence of a researcher when typing and submitting their comments. This of course immediately poses the question of whether this is an ethical form of data collection. Following Herring (1996: 165−166) on ethically responsible research in CMC, it is safe to say that we are dealing here with

a unrestricted public space on these online media sites and users are aware that they are operating in a public place and are faced with a potentially large and anonymous audience attending the speech event.

The web's fluidity poses a major methodological challenge for researchers who would like to collect and work with online data. Texts become modifiable and thus lose their "permanence and fixity" (Jucker 2003: 144). On the one hand, articles get updated; on the other hand, moderators delete comments that are not deemed appropriate. In other words, researchers might not get hold of the "most interesting" user comments. With the exception of *The Guardian Online*, the news sites evaluated in this study do not offer transparency with regard to how frequently moderators remove inappropriate comments. *The Guardian Online* indicates whenever moderators delete entries by flagging the respective contributions as "This comment has been removed by a moderator. Replies may also be deleted". Researchers have to be aware that it is often impossible to assess in how far data has been edited before appearing online (Jucker 2005: 13−14) unless moderators' actions are visible on the site or disappointed users comment on the fact that their previous contributions were deleted. In sum, the web's fluidity and the fact that a rather small sample of data has been analyzed limits generalizations that can be drawn from this study.

3. The impact of the communicative setting and medium

Before we move to the analysis proper it is crucial to discuss a number of factors that are likely to influence language use due to the specific communicative conditions and restrictions of the medium (cf. Herring 2007; Koch und Oesterreicher 2007). These factors, in turn, can be assumed to have an impact on the realization and interpretation of impoliteness in my dataset. In the following I will illustrate possible influences on my data based on the variables: activity type, interactivity, anonymity, the public dimension of the medium and moderation as well as netiquette rules. Paying attention to these factors is also fruitful in terms of Bousfield's (2008: 74) approach to reconstructing speaker intention.

3.1. Activity type

Considering the activity type (Bousfield 2008: 169−173), we can classify those "Have-your-say" sections as forms of public debates, where people are expected and even invited to criticize, disagree and debate news affairs. Nevertheless, there are boundaries of appropriateness. For example, like most other newspapers, *The Guardian Online* (2009) has established a set of "Community standards and participation guidelines" stat-

ing rules for audience members who would like to have their say on the online newspaper platform. Rule number 1 reads as follows: "We welcome debate and dissent, but personal attacks (on authors, other users or any individual), persistent trolling and mindless abuse will not be tolerated." Thus, despite the fact that it might be more acceptable and appropriate in this context to use conflictive and potentially face-threatening moves such as disagreement and criticism, there are established community boundaries when it comes to personal attacks and continuous purposeful offences. Also, as already mentioned in Section 1, the same face-threat might be interpreted as acceptable by some users and as unacceptable and impolite by others despite the activity type (cf. Culpeper 2005 as cited in Kienpointner [2008: 251−252] who describes this phenomenon for the institutional context).

3.2. Interactivity

The interactive nature of online news allows the readership to take on influential discoursal roles and active speaking rights in the online news communication cycle. Traditional media introduced forms of personal audience contributions to break with the long-established one-directional form of communication (Jucker 2000: 654) associated with mass media communication for decades. Now, newspapers engage and attract audience members by allowing them to actively participate in the shaping of current events. Users complement the news with diverse viewpoints or react to deficiencies in the news report (cf. Schlobinski and Siever [2005: 55] on journalistic weblogs). While speaking rights were in the hands of the journalists for decades, the "silent" reader of news now becomes an active participant and producer of news (Bruns 2005: 315). In other words, users have a platform that allows them to directly (and arguably intentionally) attack the journalist's face and thus her/his social standing in public. While the interactive nature of CMC is an important consideration for my study, the contextual factor of anonymity may also influence the realization and interpretation of impoliteness in my dataset.

3.3. Anonymity in public

I would like to propose that users have less face at stake and consequently less face to lose in the publicly accessible "Have-your-say" sections, since their "real-life" identity remains largely hidden under the cover of anonymity in CMC. Even though newspapers usually have a registration policy for users who would like to share their opinion in "Have-your-say" sections, the identification procedure is normally limited to sharing the bare minimum of personal details. A user name or

so-called pseudonym and a geographical location will often be the only details visible to other newspaper readers on these discussion platforms. The three newspapers in this study ask their users to provide them with an email address, a name and in the case of *Times Online*, also their sex and date of birth; however, those can be faked very easily. Also, these details are only used internally for administrative purposes; the only information visible to other users is the user-name and the location of the user with whom they are communicating. Optionally, users can set up a more detailed profile including pictures.

A report by the Swiss newspaper *SonntagsZeitung*, published in December 2008 (Bauer 2008), provides indications of the influence of anonymity on the communication behaviour of users. The newspaper reported that a growing number of users – part of what they call the "the anonymous mob" (translation by the author) – overwhelm newspapers with extremely inappropriate comments. The anonymity of the web is the culprit, they say. This has led newspapers such as *tagesanzeiger.ch* (http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch) to change their rules of audience participation; pseudonyms are not accepted and "real names" are required. However, the question here is whether the fact that "real names" are requested will make a difference. Users can still easily invent real-sounding names rather than giving their actual names. In the future, users might even have to register via their mobile phone first before being allowed to comment on the more explosive topics.

So while it appears that users are no longer operating under the cover of anonymity across all news media sites (cf. *tagesanzeiger.ch*), this policy is not in place on the news sites analyzed in this study. The *Guardian Online*, *The Daily Telegraph Online* and *Times Online* all allow users to remain anonymous during online interactions. This has implications for the kind of "face" which is "at stake" for the various interactants in my dataset. It appears that we have an asymmetrical distribution between users and journalists in terms of the potential for "losing one's face" or having one's "face damaged" (cf. Bousfield's discussion [2008: 33–42] on the concept of face in various im/politeness frameworks). While journalists, in general, are publicly known figures and have a public reputation to defend, users remain anonymous. All we know about the user in Figure 1 is her/his user name: "neoconimist". On the other hand, the journalists are presented with a detailed profile (see Figure 2). We know the full name of the journalist Polly Toynbee as well as what she looks like and which job positions she holds/held at various institutions. It is argued here that the more that is known about a person, the more damaging face-threats can be. While the impact of these face-threats may be much more damaging to press professionals than to anonymous users, it has to be added that journalists may utilize their physical and temporal

Figure 2. *Online profile of journalist from* The Guardian Online[5].

detachment from the commentators for face-saving defence strategies. Some journalists may not feel obliged to respond, simply ignoring the face-threat or using the excuse of never even having read the offensive comment.

However, the fact that anonymous users issue these face-attacks at journalists in a public setting, in front of their readership may potentially boost the face-damage experienced by the journalist. This assumption is in line with Bousfield's discussion of public dressing downs of recruits in front of their squad mates:

> The fact that the public (informal) dressing downs are issued in front of the recruits' localized 'society' or 'community of practice' (their squad mates) may potentially add to the face damage, despite the 'centrality' of impolite utterances in this institutional type of discourse, as the recruits' face is constructed, mutually supported, and loaned to them by (amongst others) each of their individual squad mates as well as the corporal or sergeant who is training them. (Bousfield 2008: 40–41)

Jucker (2000: 650) discusses a similar case for radio phone-in settings. Here the phone-in participants and the moderators are faced with the potential risk of losing their public reputation during a phone-in show. Even though it seems that phone-in participants are also protected by the cover of anonymity, this is much less so than in forms of CMC such

as online reader responses. As Tannen (1998: 239) puts it, "[…] telephone lines can be traced […] and voices recognized. The Internet ratchets up anonymity by homogenizing all messages into identical appearing print and making it almost impossible to trace messages back to the computer that send them"[6].

In fact, the audience appears to play a crucial role for the "force" of impolite comments to unfold its full potential. Günthner (2000: 158, 185) discusses the constitutive role of the audience with regard to the speech act of teasing. It is through a person being negatively exposed in front of a listening audience that the communicative force of teasing is reached. Following Günthner's line of argumentation for the act of teasing, I argue that the same phenomenon might be at play in the communicative behaviour of commentators in "Have-your-say" sections.

In sum, the anonymity of the web might encourage users to feel less accountable for their behaviour and thus also not feel at risk of losing their face in public while journalists are much more exposed. Also the presence of an audience might encourage readers to expose journalists in front of their readership. Those considerations may help to explain why users engage in more unrestrained forms of communication in CMC than they would, say, in face-to-face interaction.

3.4. Moderation and netiquette guidelines

It is very likely that moderation and netiquette guidelines affect the realization of impolite comments. Rule number three of the ten rules of conduct taken from the Guardian's community standards and participation guidelines (*The Guardian Online* 2009) reads as follows: "We understand that people often feel strongly about issues debated on the site, but we will consider removing any content that others might find extremely offensive or threatening. Please respect other people's views and beliefs and consider your impact on others when making your contribution".

Following this rule, authors might think twice before submitting an offensive comment for fear of having their contribution deleted or being generally banned from participation. On the other hand, we still find examples as illustrated in Figure 1. One possible explanation here could be that newspapers are quite often overwhelmed with the sheer amount of comments that get submitted (cf. Bauer 2008) and thus, the moderation team at newspapers might not spot inappropriate comments after all. Also, individual moderators may differ in their interpretation of what should be considered an appropriate commentary and what should not. On the other hand, the technical ease and the quasi-synchronous (Dürscheid 2005) nature of the medium could invite people to "let off steam" (Baron 2008: 112) and feel more uninhibited (cf. O'Sullivan and

Flanagin 2003) before even considering the fact that their comments may be deleted afterwards.

O'Sullivan and Flanagin (2003: 71) note that several studies support the argument that CMC might encourage uninhibited behaviour and flames[7]. However, they also point out that others object to these presumptions[8]. Taking a psychological perspective in his book *The Psychology of Cyberspace*, Suler (2004) claims that the disinhibition effect found online can be explained as follows: users perceive the anonymity and invisibility of the web in a sense of "You don't know me" and "You can't see me", thus giving users the feeling that they can act in a more unrestrained way. Also, according to Suler, the factor of asynchrony creates a sensation in users that they do not have to deal with immediate consequences in connection with their behaviour online. A sense of "See you later" creates a certain distance between the person and their actions online. One other factor, discussed by Suler, is the thought that users experience a sense of minimized authority in a CMC setting. The idea "We're equals" seems to influence the behaviour of users online.

Thus, while it remains unclear how the phenomenon of impolite and even highly aggressive user comments can be accounted for, it seems plausible that the constraints of the medium do affect the communicative behaviour of users. In the following section I would like to draw a link between the aforementioned phenomenon of "minimized authority" in CMC and its implications for the study of impoliteness.

4. Impoliteness as a powerful strategic tool

While the communicative context and the constraints of the medium may help to explain and interpret impolite behaviour in "Have-your-say" sections of news media sites, impolite user comments can also be interpreted as strategic tools which attempt to exercise power over the journalists. This relates to the factor of "minimizing authority" (Suler 2004) that users might experience in a CMC setting. Suler (2004) explains: "People are reluctant to say what they really think as they stand before an authority figure. A fear of disapproval and punishment from on high dampens the spirit. But online, in what feels like a peer relationship – with the appearances of 'authority' minimized – people are much more willing to speak out or misbehave".

So while users may experience a shift in power relations online, it is particularly the speaker's successful causing of offence that illustrates the power the speaker exerts on the interlocutor. As Bousfield states:

> […] linguistic impoliteness is (an attempt) to exercise power over one's interlocutors whilst simultaneously ensuring that one's inter-

> locutors are (overly) offended in the process. […] the 'causing of offence' (to paraphrase Culpeper 2005) through impoliteness is crucial to the actioning of one's power in these cases. That is, the communication of offence through one's impolite utterance(s) (if successful and left uncountered (see Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann 2003; Bousfield 2007b) is, context permitting, a device par excellence for the (re-)activation of one's power over one's interlocutors interactional exchange. (Bousfield 2008: 141−142)

Here the strategic value of impoliteness becomes apparent. Assuming that "[p]oliteness is based upon recognition of differences of power, degrees of social distance […]" (Fairclough 2001: 55) then impoliteness can be used to demonstrate disrespect for the status and position of an interactant. It appears that especially in public debates impoliteness can become a forceful tactical instrument. Levorato (2009: 160), who discusses the strategic use of impoliteness in the 1797−1800 Act of Union pamphlets, states: "Finally, it should also be considered that in a public debate such as this, where participants attack one another to reach their strategic goals, what Kienpointner calls 'strategic rudeness in public institutions' (Kienpointner 1997: 271), impoliteness may be perceived as a sign of power, and may therefore become a key element in the overall argumentative strategy".

Based on the above assumptions and the findings in my data, this paper proposes the following: In this situational context I define impolite moves as those moves that serve as strategic tools for online commentators to attempt an exertion of power by discursively challenging the social status and reputation of the journalists. They do so by attacking different aspects of the journalist's positive face (Brown and Levinson 2006 [1987/1978]: 61) that ultimately implicate the journalists' lack of authority, credibility and trustworthiness. In other words, the journalist's power and status are challenged by claims that s/he does not fulfill the expectations of the audience. Attacks on those aspects of face are likely to be perceived as face-threats by the journalist since they form crucial values in their professional life. Also, the data presented here illustrates how face is mutually constructed i. e., how the "interactionally constituted face is […] differ[ing] markedly from the individual's (internal and cognitive) expectation of how their face be constituted […]" (Bousfield 2008: 40). In other words, by allowing users to "talk back", the gap between the journalists' expectations of how her/his face should be constituted in public and the interactionally constituted face becomes apparent.

In the next section I will introduce my method of analysis and, based on my data analysis, I will demonstrate how users apply different types of impolite moves to discursively challenge and question the journalists' authority, credibility and trustworthiness.

5. Method of analysis

The dataset of 750 user comments from *The Guardian Online*, *The Daily Telegraph Online* and *Times Online* analyzed for this paper contains a large variety of potentially impolite moves. To keep my analysis focused for this pilot project, I chose to investigate only user responses that were specifically aimed at the journalists of the respective articles. Communication among users themselves that did not also address the journalists has not been taken into consideration in this particular study.

In a first step, I identified those comments in my dataset that appeared to contain impolite moves. For such a preliminary identification of realizations of impoliteness I used Bousfield's (2008) extended framework of Culpeper's model (1996, 2005). This initial analysis of the data revealed that there were recurring patterns. Comments did not actually deal with the topic itself but with the journalist's competence and sincerity of handling the topic. Thus in a second step, I applied a bottom-up approach to identify the strategic purpose of these realizations of impoliteness and categorize them according to different types of impoliteness. In sum, I identified 81 comments with potentially face-threatening attack(s) to aggravate the face of the respective journalists. After having reached a formal categorization of the impolite moves in my dataset, I concluded that, ultimately, those types of face-attacks were accusations that implicated the journalists' lack of authority, credibility and trustworthiness with regard to their journalistic work. Based on those findings, I also concluded that impoliteness was used strategically here to challenge the status and reputation of the journalists.

6. Results and data discussion

After having analyzed the various face-attacks aimed at the respective journalists for their strategic purpose, I would like to introduce an overview of the identified categories in my dataset (see Table 1). All in all I was able to identify nine different subtypes of face-attacks that users applied to accuse the journalists of an overall lack of authority, credibility and trustworthiness. The categories are listed in descending order by frequency.

Table 1. *Overview: Types of impoliteness in 81 comments.*

Attacks on facets of the journalist's face	Frequency
Lack of balance, wholeness, fairness and objectivity	25
Lack of judgement	17
Lack of persuasiveness	17
Lack of originality	16
Lack of accuracy and truthfulness	10
Out of touch with reality	8
Lack of topic expertise	8
Lack of consistency	8
Out of touch with the audience	4
Total no. of attacks	113
▼ Lack of authority and credibility and trustworthiness	

It is beyond the scope of this paper to demonstrate the interplay between the various subtypes; however, it should be noted that those types tend to co-occur and that there are situations where a categorization is not always clear-cut. This general tendency is in line with Bousfield's experience with impolite strategies in his data extracts from TV documentaries. Bousfield (2008: 142−143) explains that these strategies "rarely, if ever, can be said to occur in isolation with just one unambiguous meaning when the context and co-text are taken into account".

What follows is a description of each face-threatening category accompanied by illustrative case studies[9].

6.1. Lack of balance, wholeness, fairness and objectivity

In this type of user-author interaction the commentator utters a potential face-threat towards the journalist by implying that the reporter has either failed to present the full picture of a story or has not tapped into diverse voices, viewpoints, problems and solutions that would be necessary for a balanced and fair account of a news event. This face-threat is tightly linked to the implicature that the journalist is biased in her/his report of a news event. As illustrated in example (1), the commentator here accuses *The Guardian* journalist Cath Elliot of not presenting hard facts to support her line of argumentation and thus implies that the journalist is incapable of presenting a balanced story to the audience. Also, the commentator ignores the journalist by talking about her with another commentator and by disassociating her/himself (cf. Bousfield 2008: 103) even further from the author by labelling her *this type of*

feminist. All of this appears to indicate the disapproval of the commentator towards the journalist's abilities and thus forms a potential impolite attack on the journalist's face. Also the commentator frames her/his utterance ironically by saying *You are asking too much* of the journalist which emphasizes that the author does not fulfill the expectations of the audience and even fails to get the basics right (according to the commentator), namely to provide facts to support one's line of argumentation.

(1) […] *You are asking too much, facts are something that this type of feminist* [reference to journalist], *seems to miss* […]
(*The Guardian Online*, April 06, 2009)

6.2. Lack of the judgement

In this type of user-author interaction the commentator utters a potential face-threat towards the journalist by implying that the journalist either lacks judgment with regard to what are the relevant and important facts for the presentation of the news event or that s/he has failed to properly assess the news event and the sources used to report on the event. As illustrated in example (2), the commentator here clearly disagrees with *The Guardian* journalist on the essence of the news event. The article is on a scandal involving a here unnamed British MP who had her husband's adult video rentals charged as expenses on her work account. The journalist shares his views on why such an incidence could have happened in the first place. The commentator's superficial agreement *yes, yes, yes; exploitation, empowerment, whatever* is mocking the journalist. Especially the exclamative use of the adjective *whatever* underlines the commentator's wish to express indifference and scepticism towards the journalist. The commentator then continues to state what s/he thinks is the real essence of the story, namely, simply, *a dirty old man claiming video rentals on a minister's expense account.* With the phrase *That's all* s/he implies there is no more to it despite the journalist's attempt to look beyond the obvious. The commentator's remark in example (2) could also be interpreted as a potential impolite attack on the journalist's face as it implies that the journalist lacks the skills to write a good news report.

(2) *yes, yes, yes; exploitation, empowerment, whatever. What this scandal was about was a dirty old man claiming video rentals on a minister's expense account. That's all.* (*The Guardian Online*, April 06, 2009)

6.3. Lack of originality

In this type of user-author interaction the commentator utters a potential face-threat towards the journalist by implying that the journalist lacks insight and originality i. e., the journalist did not produce an original article or holds views that are not one of the following: newsworthy, unique, innovative, interesting or illuminating for the audience. As illustrated in example (3), the commentator is telling *The Guardian* journalist Cath Elliot, in no uncertain terms, that s/he does not approve of her talking unless she has something newsworthy and interesting to tell the audience. The user applies the strategy "challenge" (Bousfield 2008: 132−133) to contest the author's assumed skills to speak about the topic of the article by asking her the rhetorical question *Cath, rather than repeating the rants of the reactionary Katharine McKinnon, can you be a more bit original?* Probably, the commentator does not really expect an answer but may want to expose the journalist. At the same time, the speaker applies the strategy of pouring scorn (cf. Bousfield 2008: 114−115) on the author for not being *original* and *really boring*. The commentator's hyperbolic use of *really* underlines the commentator's negative evaluation of the journalist. In addition, the use of the negatively connotated expression *repeating the rants of the reactionary Katharine McKinnon* implies that not only does the journalist just reiterate the ideas of another person, but also that those ideas are not actually worthy of being repeated. As such, this comment forms a potential face-attack against the journalist.

(3) […] *Cath, rather than repeating the rants of the reactionary Katharine McKinnon, can you be a more bit original? Really, this type of puritanism on CiF columnist it's really boring* […]
(*The Guardian Online*, April 06, 2009)

6.4. Lack of persuasiveness

In this type of user-author interaction the commentator utters a potential face-threat towards the journalist by implying that the journalist lacks sustainable and persuasive or logical and rational arguments for her/his claims/position in the article. With the phrase *Keep spinning the line Seumas* the commentator actually accuses *The Guardian* journalist Seumas Milne of being dishonest and trying to persuade somebody *to vote for this truly horrendous government* (see example [4]). Moreover, the commentator conveys that only a *poor sucker,* rather than an intelligent, rational person, could be convinced by the journalist's line of argumentation. The use of the pejorative term *sucker* could also be interpreted as

emotive expression of anger by the commentator and might be considered impolite despite the fact that the journalist is not addressed directly (cf. Bousfield's [2008: 138−142] discussion on the use of taboo language in discourse). In sum, the above accusations could be categorized as face-threatening for the journalist.

(4) *Keep spinning the line Seumas* [reference to journalist], *maybe you'll convince another poor sucker to vote for this truly horrendous government one more time* […] (*The Guardian Online*, April 2009)

6.5. Out of touch with reality

In this type of user-author interaction the commentator utters a potential face-threat towards the journalist by implying that the journalist is out of touch with reality. In example (5), the commentator challenges the *Daily Telegraph* journalist Con Coughlin by means of the rhetorical question *What cloud is Con Coughlin living on?* The fact, that the user snubs (Bousfield 2008: 101−105) the journalist by talking about him in the third person could tentatively be interpreted as the user's disapproval of the journalist and his work. This strategy is characteristic of the speech act of accusation (cf. Günthner 2000: 110−111) to depersonalize the target of one's accusation. In example (6), the commentator addresses the author of the article directly, presenting an abundance of arguments to make the journalist realize that he is not realistic and should *wake up and smell the coffee*. Both examples could be interpreted as face-threatening considering that both users convey that the journalist is not adhering to basic journalist work ethics, namely, to report in a sensible and rational manner on a news event. Example (7) is a reader response to an article by *Times* journalist Melanie Ried entitled "Hospitals have never needed God more". Ms Ried argues for more hospital chaplains to give patients the "care and compassion that medical staff can no longer give them". She bases her arguments on a real-life documentary TV series called "The Hospital" which focuses on what appears to be "brutalization" in the interaction between patient-medical staff. Also she recounts her negative personal experience with a doctor in a UK hospital after having had to admit her daughter to the Accident and Emergency department (A&E). The commentator first attacks the journalist by stating that *Hospital chaplains are as out of touch with the reality of health services as the commenter herself appears*. The person boosts the face-threat by accusing the journalist of being so much out of touch with reality that she could not even judge whether her daughter was sick or healthy: *BTW your doctors soulless appearance was masking his annoyance at having to waste time on a well child.*

(5) […] *What cloud is Con Coughlin* [reference to journalist] *living on?* (*The Daily Telegraph Online*, April 06, 2009)

(6) […] *The government are a bunch who steal from us to watch porn films … keep mistresses … lie about expenses … take bribes … etc etc … and then say sorry when they are caught. They rob us blind. The prisons are full of miscreants who would happily apologise if they were to be set free … Mr. Johnston* [reference to journalist]*, wake up and smell the coffee …* (*The Daily Telegraph Online*, April 09, 2009)

(7) *Visiting an AandE once and watching a TV programme does not an expert make. I'm afraid Hospital chaplains are as out of touch with the reality of health services as the commenter herself appears. BTW your doctors soulless appearance was masking his annoyance at having to waste time on a well child.* (*Times Online*, April 09, 2009)

6.6. Lack of accuracy and truthfulness

In this type of user-author interaction the commentator utters a potential face-threat towards the journalist by implying that the journalist either does not tell the truth or has not done their research well and consequently has failed to present facts accurately. In example (8), Cassandra Jardine, the journalist of the article, is actually accused of being a liar[10] for, apparently, not providing an *honest report of the facts*, next to being accused of not having the mental capacity to correctly report on a news event: *Cassandra Jardine* [reference to journalist]*, has completely failed to use her critical faculties*. Through the use of the hyperbolic phrase, *has completely failed*, with the negative evaluation lexeme *fail*, the user underlines what s/he thinks is a severe failure of the journalist. Similar to example (5), also here the user snubs (Bousfield 2008: 101−105) the journalist by talking about her in the third person to create the impression of disapproval of the journalist and her work. The ironic use of the modifier *sadly* to indicate regret and compassion with the author for her lack of skills underlines the intention of the speaker to cause offence.

(8) *Sadly, the aptly named Cassandra Jardine* [reference to journalist]*, has completely failed to use her critical faculties and provide an honest report of the facts* […] (*The Daily Telegraph Online*, April 07, 2009)

6.7. Lack of topic expertise

In this type of user-author interaction the commentator utters a potential face-threat towards the journalist by implying that the journalist

lacks the competence to speak on the subject matter of the article. In example (9), the commentator argues that *The Guardian* journalist Seamus Milne's suggestions to solve the debt crisis in the UK cannot be taken seriously since he is *not exactly an expert on economic matters*. The commentator supports his claim with a hyperbolic prediction of a negative future event: *The policies that Milne, Toynbee and other 'commentators' advocate on the other hand would turn a recession into total economic meltdown*. The commentator snubs the journalist by talking about him in the third person and even actively animates others to *Ignore Seamus.* This must certainly be seen as a reaction to the journalist's chosen headline of the article titled: *Ignore the Tories. You can't cut your way out of a slump.*

(9) *Ignore Seamus* [reference to journalist] *(he is not exactly an expert on economic matters).* […] *You can't borrow your way out of a debt crisis.* […] *The policies that Milne, Toynbee and other 'commentators' advocate on the other hand would turn a recession into total economic meltdown* […] (*The Guardian Online*, April 09, 2009)

6.8. Lack of consistency

In this type of user-author interaction the commentator utters a potential face-threat towards the journalist by implying that the author's opinion and position taken in the article is not consistent with her/his previous works or that the line of argumentation taken in the present article is inconsistent. Example (10) is a reader response to the article "Why I've stopped supporting Save the Children" by *Daily Telegraph* journalist Philip Johnston. In this article, the journalist recounts why he personally thinks that it is wrong to give money to this organization. He argues that the organization uses donation money first and foremost for their own political ends before money actually reaches those children for whom the donations were meant. The commentator in example (10) sharply responds to the journalist's point of view by accusing him of lack of credibility. According the commentator's opinion, the author lacks expert knowledge to judge the situation and only displays fake compassion for those children. The rhetorical question *And in any case don't you* [reference to journalist] *know most of your donation goes in advertising, wages and admin anyway?* could be interpreted as an indirect accusation to challenge the journalist for his lack of knowledge (cf. Manouchehr 2009: 222−223). The commentator does not really expect an answer but wants to expose the journalist. The rhetorical question also implies that whatever the circumstances, the journalist should know better. The commentator continues by suggesting to the journalist *You*

should go to Bombay and feed them yourself if you are that concerned. This if-construction implicates that the plausibility of the journalist's line of argumentation is put in question. If the journalist is really concerned about the wellbeing of those children, then he should not write articles about what should be done, accusing organizations of bad behaviour but actually take personal action to help these children. With this type of if-clause, which follows a quasi-logical argumentation structure (Perelman 1980 as cited in Günthner 2000: 109), the speaker accuses the journalist of being argumentatively inconsistent and at the same time the user demands a justification. The face-threatening act towards the journalist is enhanced by accusing the journalist of producing substandard articles based on the reporter's apparent lack of knowledge of the subject matter: *a bit of travel might improve your articles anyway, for a start its only foreigners who refer to Bombay as Mumbai.*

(10) […] *And in any case don't you* [reference to journalist] *know most of your donation goes in advertising, wages and admin anyway? You should go to Bombay and feed them yourself if you are that concerned a bit of travel might improve your articles anyway, for a start its only foreigners who refer to Bombay as Mumbai* […]
(*The Daily Telegraph Online*, April 07, 2009)

6.9. Out of touch with the audience

In this type of user-author interaction the commentator utters a potential face-threat towards the journalist by implying that the journalist does not respect or take into consideration the needs of the audience. Example (11) is taken from the "Have-your-say" section of an article titled "Personally, I blame the parents" by the *Daily Telegraph* journalist Cassandra Jardine, who offers her personal account on what she thinks are the reasons behind the unacceptable and worrying behaviour displayed by a growing number of children and young people in the UK. The commentator, clearly disagreeing with Ms. Jardine's point of view, accuses the journalist indirectly of having no respect for her readers by claiming that the article only *exists because this newspaper has no respect for its readers*. Also the user boosts the face-threat by creating an impression of indisputableness. This is done so by phrasing her comment as declarative sentence in present tense. Thereby the user creates the impression that s/he is uttering a generally known truth. As Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca (1971: 160) put it, "The present is the tense of maxims and proverbial sayings, of that which is always timely and never out of date". Taking also into consideration that the article exists in the first place because it has been written by the journalist as a representative of

the newspaper and that it is her personal view on this issue, this comment could be interpreted as an indirect face-threat towards the journalist.

(11) *This article is designed to push a few middle-England buttons, it is a red rag to the rightwing tendencies of the average Torygraph reader. It exists because this newspaper has no respect for its readers* [indirect reference to the journalist].

(*The Daily Telegraph Online*, April 07, 2009)

7. Conclusions and outlook

Given the challenge of identifying and conceptualizing impoliteness in general and more specifically in a computer-mediated environment, it has been proven especially useful to look at netiquette rules for norms of appropriateness, evaluating communicative acts against this "cultural frame of communication" (Bousfield 2008: 74). Also, having taking into consideration that those "Have-your-say" sections are forms of public debates has helped to demonstrate that users may use impolite moves strategically in their overall argumentative strategy. The causing of offence can then be interpreted as a powerful tool to expose the journalists. It has also been argued that the fact that those face-threats are uttered in front of a large audience and more specifically the journalist's readership may boost the strength of the face-threats.

This study shows that despite the fact that users are invited to debate, criticize and disagree on news topics, in those comment sections users move beyond those netiquette boundaries to attack journalists on a more personal level in their professional role as journalists. Users do so by claiming that the journalist does not fulfill the expectations of the audience. Data analysis revealed that face-threats were targeted at the journalist's authority, credibility and trustworthiness. It was argued that these attacks are likely to be perceived as face-threats by the journalists since these characteristics form crucial values in a reporter's professional life. Journalists are asked to stick to a basic journalist's code of ethics including such values as accuracy, objectivity and truthfulness (cf. The Guardian's Editorial Code 2007). Being accused of not adhering to those ethical guidelines is questioning them in their core capacity as journalists.

While the focus of this paper is on case studies to illustrate the various subtypes of face-attacks against journalists, it will be essential for future research to study the co-occurrence and interplay between the various subtypes. Also, it will be important to look at a larger dataset to allow for a refinement and extension of the analytic categories introduced here.

This will also help to get a better idea of the extent of impolite user behaviour on news sites. Broadening the scope of investigation to interactions among users will allow us to gain a better understanding of the complex dynamics of this communicative setting. In this respect, it will also be useful to look at reactions of users to norm violations of other users in these comment sections. This first order method will balance the second order approach taken in this pilot study. Last but not least, it will be beneficial to look at additional situational and medium factors (i. e., asynchrony, limited space for text etc.) to discuss their potential influence on the realization and interpretation of impoliteness in this form of CMC.

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Notes

1. This links to the discussion on the web's fluidity in Section 2.3.
2. Cf. Section 3.1 for a more detailed discussion on the activity type in "Have-your-say" sections.
3. Source: Polly Toynbee (2009). This comment serves illustrative purposes only. It has not been included in my dataset.
4. Cf. Section 3.4 for a more detailed discussion on netiquette rules in "Have-your-say" sections.
5. Source: http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/pollytoynbee (accessed 03 June 2009).

6. It has to be added though, with technology advancing, that tracing computers and IP addresses is not so difficult any more; however, the challenge remains of tracking down a particular individual "red-handed" on a specific computer.
7. Gurak 2001; Kiesler et al. 1984; Siegel et al. 1986; Sproull and Kiesler 1991, as cited in O' Sullivan and Flanagin (2003: 71).
8. Culnan and Markus 1987; Lea et al. 1992; Postmes et al. 1998; Spears and Lea 1994; Walther 1992; Walther et al. 1994, as cited in O' Sullivan and Flanagin (2003: 71).
9. I have reproduced all the misspellings and punctuation contained in the original user comments.
10. In antiquity, Cassandra was a seeress whose prophecies were accurate but she could never convince others of their truth. The commentator would like stress the fact that one should not believe the journalist Jardine but ignores the fact that the oracle Cassandra did speak the truth.

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